

SS EDMUND FITZGERALD

Great Lakes Ore Freighter Sank 28 Years Ago in Terrible November Storm

On November 10, 1975, the 729-foot freighter S.S. **Edmund Fitzgerald** was hauling a heavy load of taconite (small iron ore pellets) from Superior, Wisconsin to Detroit, Michigan when she was caught in a severe storm that churned up 27- to 30-foot waves with a following sea. Trying to find protection from heavy seas in the more protected lee waters of the Canadian shore, Captain Ernest McSorley selected a northerly alternate route across Lake Superior as he steered toward Whitefish Bay. The ship's two radar systems failed and, in a rare occurrence, the back-up generator for the Whitefish Point signals failed to turn on when electrical power was knocked out by the storm. Eventually the light was restored, but the radio beacon remained inoperable.

At 7:25 p.m., Captain Jesse Cooper of the S.S. **Arthur M. Anderson**, which was following 8 to 10 miles behind the Fitzgerald and offering navigational assistance, lost the Fitzgerald's image on his radar screen less than 15 minutes after his last radio contact with Captain McSorley. Although McSorley had earlier reported a list (tilt to one side) and loss of a fence rail and two vents, his last transmission to Cooper at 7:10 was, "We're holding our own." The ship, with its load of iron ore and crew of 29 men, sank to the bottom of Lake Superior where it now rests, broken in two with bow upright and stern upside down.

At the time, it was the worst shipping disaster on the Great Lakes in 11 years. The Fitzgerald weighed 13,632 tons and was 729 feet long. In 1958, when it was first launched, it was the largest carrier on the Great Lakes, and remained so until 1971. The Fitzgerald was labeled "The Pride of the American Flag". In 1964 it became the first ship on the Great Lakes to carry more than a million tons of ore through the Soo Locks.

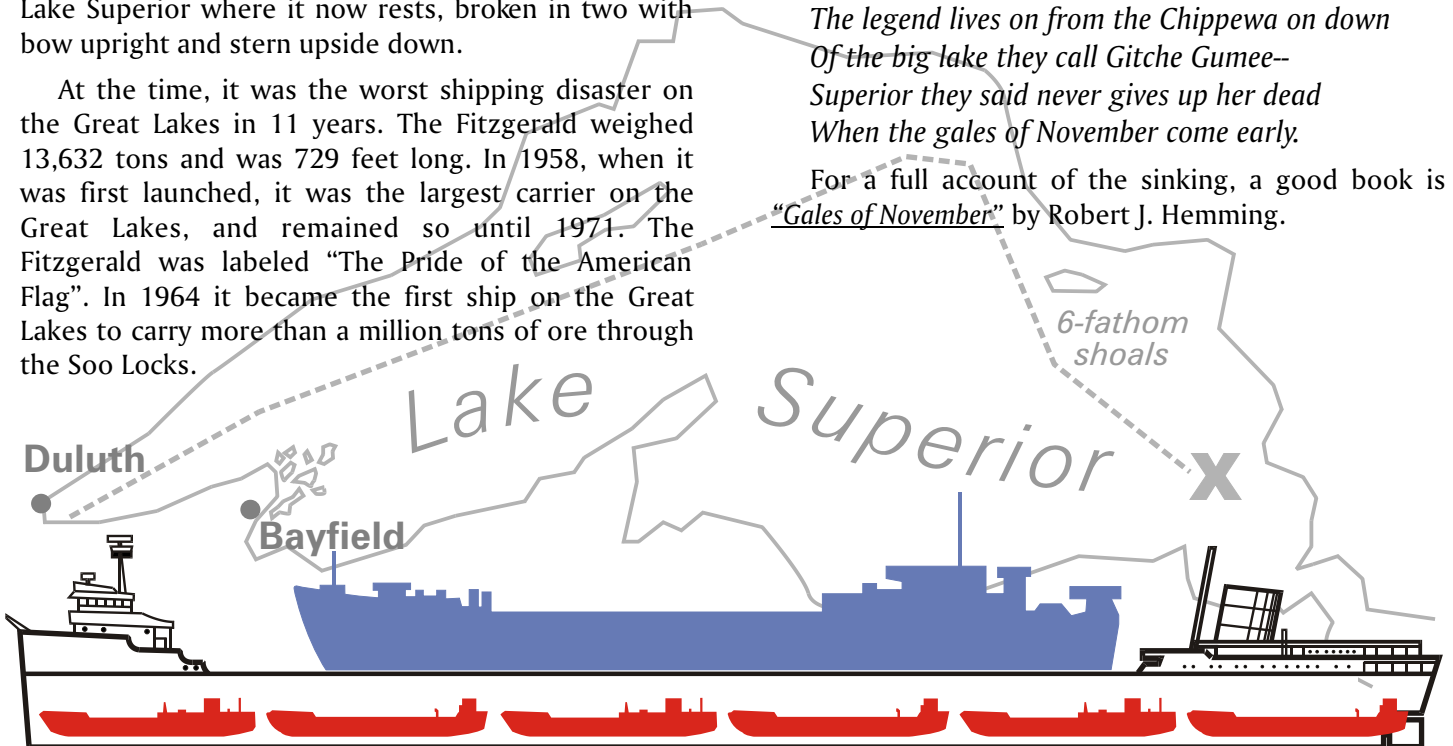


Today the wreckage of the Edmund Fitzgerald lies in 530 feet of water in eastern Lake Superior. The exact cause of the sinking is still debated to this day. One popular theory has the ship taking on water and having the hull ripped open while steaming in shallow waters near 6-fathom shoals. Another claims the ship's hatches came loose and allowed water to enter the cargo holds while plowing through the 44-foot waves.

Perhaps the most fitting tribute to the ship and its crew can be found in the words of a song written by Gordon Lightfoot--

*The legend lives on from the Chippewa on down
Of the big lake they call Gitche Gumee--
Superior they said never gives up her dead
When the gales of November come early.*

For a full account of the sinking, a good book is "Gales of November" by Robert J. Hemming.



The *Fitz* was 729 feet in length--over 300 feet longer than an LST (shown in blue atop the Ore Freighter). It would take over six LCTs (shown in red) to equal the length of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*.